

## **Chapter 15**

### **DEATH BY VIOLENCE**

#### **Overview: Nature of Event**

The death of a student by any means is a tragic event, but a violent death is even more traumatic. We must deal with it in our school community in a compassionate manner. Sometimes the alleged perpetrator is known to others in our school and may in fact be a student, a former student or the sibling of a student. You need to keep the unique needs of all concerned in mind as you plan our response. If the death occurred as the result of family violence, children may wonder if the same thing could happen in their family. If the death was the result of a random act, questions of personal safety will be raised. Students will speculate about the facts and must be reminded not to rely on rumors for information. If a friend or family member of one of your students is the alleged perpetrator, your student will need some extra support. Sometimes people will “blame” the friend or family member and scapegoat them even though they had no control over the actions of that other person.

If a violent death occurs on your campus, the response issues are even more complex than usual. Your campus is no longer a school. It's now a crime scene, and special precautions need to be understood. Under the Incident Command System your school is now under the jurisdiction of local law enforcement. Areas will be sealed within a law enforcement perimeter. Students and staff will be questioned. Your campus will be home to a number of emergency services personnel as they perform their jobs. Even when the event is over, people may not be able to leave because the police will have set up inner and outer perimeters for their investigation. In other words, your school will be very chaotic for quite some time.

Many of your staff and students will be questioned during the investigation. Cooperate with the police as they do their investigation and isolate those people who were witnesses and discourage them from talking to one another or to others until they've had a chance to talk with an investigating officer.

While public safety personnel are on campus, they will be in charge. The principal will assist the Incident Commander, the person with overall responsibility for the response. All faculty and staff will assist where ever possible. When police, fire and other agency personnel leave the scene, then the school's Incident Management Team will take over the job of implementing and coordinating a response.

#### **Overview: Special Considerations**

The media will most likely respond within the first few minutes. The local police department will likely have its own spokesperson on scene to handle reporters. The district's Public Information representatives should coordinate their activities with him or her.

It is a good idea to set up a Media Information Center and funnel all communication through your Public Information representatives. Prepare statements and update them frequently. Making an appearance every 15 minutes or so to say “We have no new information at this

time, but as soon as we do, we will let you know,” will do much to keep reporters informed and controlled. Be careful not to be tricked into giving more of statement than you’ve prepared. If you allow questions, respond to only those you can answer honestly. Otherwise, say something like, “I’m not sure about that, but I’ll check into it and get back to you.”

When working with the media, keep a few things in mind. Do not give out any names. Do not allow access to the scene to take pictures of the injured, the blood or distraught friends and family. Advise the parents and families of both the victims and perpetrators of the media presence and tell them that they don’t have to talk to reporters. Many people don’t know that they can deny an interview. Discourage students from talking to the media.

The scene itself has some special considerations. In many states, blood products are considered to be “hazardous waste” and fall under OSHA requirements. They must be handled appropriately. In other words, the custodian cannot just clean it up. Check with the local law enforcement representative to see if your community has a business that specializes in crime scene clean up. If not, they may be able to recommend another resource.

Wherever the event took place, it is important to normalize the area. For instance, if the event happened inside a classroom, it might be advisable to rearrange that area as soon as possible. If it happened in a hallway, the walls and floors should be cleaned, painted or replaced.

Caution should be taken not to inadvertently create a memorial by making a very obvious change to a small portion of the area. If you paint, paint the whole wall. If you lay new carpet, re-carpet the entire hallway. It may seem expensive and unnecessary, but it’s emotionally beneficial in the long run. A very obviously patched carpet, a repainted, different colored section of a wall or a dented file cabinet is left in its original place may serve as visual reminders of the event and make it more difficult for people to recover. Students or staff alike may avoid the area or otherwise put too much attention on it.

If the event is the result of family or domestic violence, contact your local Domestic Violence agency and get information for your students including a hotline, crisis number where they can access help if they need it for their own situations.

### **Key Resources**

You will need resources for several functions. One will be to provide Critical Incident Stress Management activities to everyone in your school community. This includes support and relief for staff, classroom activities for children and support for parents.

Using “outsiders” as crisis counselors may be the best course of action. When we become “secondary” victims, we lose our objectivity and need support ourselves. Bringing knowledgeable, sensitive people into your classrooms allows students, faculty and staff not only to get answers to their questions but also to address their fears. The key is that anyone providing counseling should be trained in handling children and school systems. When those outside resources come to your school, they should check in with the Community Liaison on your Incident Management Team so you know who is on your campus and what activities they are doing.

If the incident happened on your campus or the reaction is extreme, a Parent Informational Evening may be necessary to restore the parents' belief that their children are safe. Local law enforcement and mental health professionals should play a large role in that meeting.

Resources to deal with a traumatic event can come from a variety of places. At the local level, many communities have agencies (such as a county mental health department) and private organizations that do crisis counseling. Some police and fire agencies have trained staff that may help with Critical Incident Stress Management. Arranging with neighboring schools to mobilize their counseling staff in the event of a crisis is another way to have extra resources available.

Beyond the local level, most states have networks of Critical Incident Stress Management Teams who can be mobilized quickly to come and assist. And the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation maintains a list of Critical Incident Stress Management Teams throughout the world.

### **Safe Room Considerations**

A Student Safe Room is a designated place where students can go if they are having difficulty maintaining their composure in a regular supportive classroom environment. It should be staffed by at least two knowledgeable people and be equipped with tissues, drawing and writing materials, stuffed animals, books about loss and information on typical reactions and refreshments such as cookies and juice. Adolescents need to know that their reactions are normal. If they are teary, having trouble remembering or can't concentrate, are accident-prone or moody, these are normal reactions to a traumatic incident.

An attendance procedure needs to be in place to manage the tendency of students to leave classrooms and then just wander around campus. It is recommended that students sign out of their regular classroom and then sign in to the Safe Room within a certain time limit. If a student is having a particularly difficult time, it may be advisable to contact his or her parents or guardian and to notify a counselor.

A Staff Safe Room is a designated place for staff to go if they are having difficulty maintaining their composure in the classrooms. The room should have an element of privacy and be equipped with items such as tissues, writing materials, a teddy bear or two and refreshments such as juice and cookies. It should also contain information on typical reactions to crises and counseling benefits available through the district.

The safe room should be staffed by at least two knowledgeable people who are trusted by faculty and staff alike. Local mental health professionals, public safety chaplains or other outsiders often have implied credibility.

A mechanism for staff to be relieved of their duties for a few minutes needs to be in place prior to the event and should be discussed with all faculty/staff members during any Before-School briefing.

## **Parent/Community Informational Meeting Considerations**

When violence hits a school community, it is advisable to hold a Parent/Community Informational Meeting. This allows parents and other citizens to express their concerns and get information on the complex issue of school safety and violence. The meeting can be held from as soon as a few days after the event to anytime within a couple of weeks. Allow students to be involved in the planning process for this meeting and encourage all students to attend. Make sure they have a place to raise their concerns and ask questions in an open forum.

Whenever the meeting takes place, arrange for translators, transportation and childcare, if appropriate. The format of the meeting should be one that allows interaction and a forum to ask questions. Expect parents to be angry and scared. Allow that to be expressed appropriately.

Encourage parents to talk with their children about their reactions. Also discuss the temptation of many parents to pull back on the freedom that they give their child. Advise parents to do this with caution so their children aren't saddled with the additional burden of a loss of personal freedom and responsibility as well as the loss of a classmate. This is of particular importance with adolescents.

Keep in mind that there will be questions that only law enforcement professionals can answer. As such, invite public safety officials to attend. You might also invite mental health experts who specialize in school safety, violence and its aftermath. Coordinate the agenda ahead of time so you'll know what to expect from each guest. They also will benefit from knowing what you want from them and how they fit with the rest of the agenda.

Anticipate that media will attend this meeting. Manage them by setting up interviews with key people and giving them information ahead of time on the program that will be presented. Also provide information on any and all steps the school community had taken that emphasized safety and crisis planning before this event. If you take the initiative and provide key people for interviews, you'll have better control over the situation and assist them to do a good job of reporting and covering this community event. You may even want to hand select a couple of students for the media to interview. Make sure the student has his or her parent's permission, however.

### **Before School**

If the incident took place after school or over the weekend, a staff meeting before the next school day is essential to share information and reactions. This meeting should be thirty to sixty minutes long and should be attended by all staff members: teachers, custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, campus aides, etc. It should be organized by the Incident Management Team (who should have met prior to this meeting, at least by phone) and may be attended by local law enforcement or others to provide information and support.

Notification of the meeting should be done in whatever manner is most convenient for your school and district. If you use a phone tree, start the calling process in the prior evening if it is not too late or in the morning, about an hour or two prior to the normal start of the school



day. Calling people early in the morning is often the best course of action. It is better if your staff loses an hour or two of sleep than to not sleep at all.

The agenda should include general information on the incident and specific information about its aftermath. School personnel will be shaken because their illusions of being able to keep kids safe will be shattered. Violence has now touched their lives in a very personal way and they will be forever changed. They need extra support during this time so they can deal with their own reactions and still be a healthy support for students.

Of prime concern is identifying students and others who may be particularly vulnerable. Remind your staff that an adolescent's reaction may include regression, confusion, forgetfulness, stomach upsets, emotional outbursts, isolation and engaging in risky behavior as a way to numb the pain. Staff needs to be aware and refer any vulnerable students to extra assistance. If the event was the result of family or domestic violence, ask staff to pay close attention to students who may be experiencing similar living situations.

Encourage staff members to be honest with students about their reactions but not to use students as a forum to process their own feelings. Students need to see healthy modeling of grief. They also need to feel that the significant adults in their lives are still in control.

You might also suggest postponing any test scheduled for that day. While maintaining the day's structure provides a feeling of comfort and safety, you should have a realistic and sympathetic expectation of student performance.

Staff members may need extra support during this time so they can deal with their own reactions and still be a healthy support for students. If a person is having a particularly tough time, provide whatever assistance he or she might need—maybe an additional classroom aide, a break from extra-curricular responsibilities or a few days off. Don't expect your staff to function in a "business as usual" manner.

### **First Period**

The beginning of the day is the crucial time to begin rumor control. If we don't give students accurate information, they will create their own stories, details and theories. Their fiction is often much more extreme than reality. It isn't necessary to give graphic details, but it is important to give facts. In other words, telling students something like "Dwayne was killed last night. No one knows for sure yet, but it seems he and some friends were in the park and were attacked by a group of men. The police are investigating. We will give you information as we can," will help them deal with reality, not supposition and rumors.

The classroom is an ideal setting to discuss not only the incident but also normal reactions. In fact, the discussion should focus on reactions of the students and what they may experience as the result of the grief and trauma of the incident. Adolescents need to know that they may have trouble concentrating, be accident-prone or be drawn to risky behavior such as alcohol or other drugs, sex, driving fast or other risky behavior as a way of numbing the pain. This is also the time to start determining which students may be more vulnerable and referring them to a counselor or the Incident Management Team. Provide community crisis numbers for those students who wish for anonymity.

## **Rest of the Day**

Children who are emotionally impacted by an event sometimes isolate themselves from others. They may hide in bathrooms, back closets or little used hallways. With high school students, this may be their car in the student parking lot. Make sure you check these areas every 15 minutes.

If you decide to prepare a letter to go home for parents or guardians, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, explain what has happened, expressing condolences for the victim's family. Depending on the circumstances be sensitive to the needs of the alleged perpetrator's family. Also be sensitive to any ongoing police investigation. Next, provide information to parents about their own child's possible reactions. Include available community resources, including 24-hour phone numbers for assistance. Last, if you plan to hold a Parent Informational Night, give information or alert them that more information is to follow.

## **After School**

A staff meeting after school serves several purposes. First, it enables you to update the staff on the current status of events. Second, it lays the groundwork for the next day's response. Last, it lets staff members decompress after a very intense day.

The agenda needs to allow for time to ventilate. One structure is to organize into small groups (no more than 10 people each) and give them a chance to talk about what the worst part of the day was for them. Allow 20 minutes or so for this.

After that, bring everyone back into the large group to share information and begin to identify those people that may need some additional help dealing with the tragedy. This is a good place to involve community resources such as chaplains, clergy, public safety or mental health professionals to educate your staff members on typical reactions. Also share the latest information you may have about the investigation, funeral services, charitable donations, etc. Conclude the meeting by going over any schedule you may have devised for the next day.

## **Things to Emphasize**

The points to remember when dealing with a violent death are:

- The illusion of "it never would happen here" has been shattered. Staff and students will be afraid that it could happen again.
- Be sensitive to the fact that the alleged perpetrator may be a student, former student or the family member of a student.
- There will be an on going police investigation.
- If anyone is feeling vulnerable, get help.
- Create a way to say good-bye. A journal or a scrapbook works well.
- The school staff members may be "secondary" victims. They need support too.
- Give accurate information to reduce rumors.

There are several points to keep in mind when dealing with a violent death that impacts a school. If this is the first incident of this type, the illusion that “it would never happen here” has been shattered. Staff and students may be afraid that it could happen again. If this is not the first event of this type, it adds to the cumulative traumatic stress that is already present in your students and staff. Even though the reaction may not appear to be extreme, it’s important to encourage everyone to talk about it and express reactions in other healthy ways. This event may become a “trigger” event for some people and causes them to remember past events.

If there are family members of the victim or alleged perpetrators in your school, give them some extra support. People sometimes will “blame” a friend or family member when in fact they had no control over another person’s actions.

In a violent death, there no doubt will be a police investigation. Work with the police to find answers and provide information that will help your students and staff recover. If this was an incident of family or domestic violence, contact your local community agency that specializes in that area to get information and referral numbers.

Create a way to say goodbye to the victim. Work with the family to include the school in a family memorial or funeral service. The family’s grief will be intense. Be careful not to get caught up in it and overreact with a school memorial or other act that somehow glamorizes the event or person. There are many ways to provide closure to your students and staff. One way is to buy a scrapbook or journal and encourage everyone to write poems, stories, create artwork, add photographs or put any other contribution to it. Make this available at school for two weeks and then present it to the family as a gift. It provides a tangible way to say goodbye and offers natural closure. A word of caution though—make sure someone reads the book before it’s given to the family to make sure there isn’t anything hurtful or inappropriate in it.

### **Things to Avoid**

- Avoid any activity that glamorizes the student or his/her death. Don’t do large memorials or assemblies.
- Don’t be afraid to talk about death with students. They need to talk about it to reduce their own risk.
- Avoid ignoring the warning signs of other students or staff.
- Do not clean out the victim’s locker or reassign his/her desk or take down his/her artwork for a day or two.

Avoid any activity that glamorizes the student or his death. Although it is tragic when we lose a member of our school community, the person shouldn’t become more important in death than s/he was in life. Work with the family to involve school people in the memorial or funeral service. The purpose of a memorial service is to acknowledge both the life and death of the victim and give everyone else a ritualistic way of saying goodbye and expressing feelings that will begin the closure that is needed for people to go on. This can be accomplished at a service coordinated by the family without the school taking on ownership.

Do not clean out the desk of the victim, or take down her artwork or remove her name from charts for a few days. Give everyone a chance to adjust to the loss.

## **Day 2**

A short staff meeting before school may be appropriate on Day 2. It can be used to present new information such as updates on funeral arrangements, available resources on campus and referral procedures for at-risk students. Also, remind staff that students will have a difficult time concentrating and remembering. It may be advisable to postpone tests for a few days.

If you opt to skip a morning staff meeting, it is a good idea to prepare and distribute a bulletin. The bulletin should thank all staff members for their care and concern, remind them to refer high-risk or vulnerable students to counselors, give some strategies for self-care and outline the plan for day.

## **Day 3**

By the third day, the school community is beginning to settle down again into its normal routine. This may be interrupted by a funeral service on this day or one of the following days. On the day a service is held, make provisions for students to attend with their parents. Arrange substitutes for staff members who wish to attend. If the service is held in the morning, encourage everyone to come back to school for the afternoon. Expect an emotional day as students and adults continue to deal with the incident. Use this time to encourage everyone to contribute to the scrapbook that will be given to the family.

## **Day 4**

As the week progresses, your school may begin to appear normal again. Remember there is a big difference between APPEARING normal and BEING normal. Expect occasional outbursts of emotion.

## **Day 5**

As time goes by, students and staff will return to normal functioning. School will start to feel normal again.

### **Plan:**

- \* Continue to refer students who may seem at-risk
- \* If there was a death, encourage staff and students to contribute to a scrapbook to be given to the victim's family
- \* Squelch rumors as they surface
- \* Keep students and staff updated as new information becomes available
- \* If you have students or staff returning for the first time, support their transition back to school



## **Day 6**

If a Parent Informational Meeting is going to be held, start making the necessary arrangements for a location, food and the agenda. Begin notifying parents and community members of details.

Plan:

- \* If you have students returning for the first time, support their transition back to school
- \* Continue to refer students who may seem at-risk.

## **Day 7**

In the case of a violent death, it may be important to hold a Parent/Community Informational Evening. This is a mechanism to allow parents to express the underlying fear that their child is vulnerable. This meeting is also a way to provide information to parents on how to best support their children as they recover from this tragedy. Ask your mental health professionals to contribute. Let them talk about the complex issues of feeling vulnerable, what some warning signs of trouble might be and how to intervene.

Reassure the parents that the school is doing everything it can to help the students recover and thank them for their support. Have handouts listing typical reactions to trauma, a 24-hour crisis number and any other information that seems appropriate. Provide translators, transportation and childcare, if appropriate.

During this meeting, be sensitive to any particular issues that this event may have. If there is an on going police investigation, for instance, work with the investigation team to decide what information may be given to the public. If the act was one of family violence, be sensitive to other family members and their feelings of shock, confusion and survivor guilt.

## **First Month**

During the first week or so, students and staff will talk a lot about the event. After a couple of weeks it will start to seem as though every one has forgotten about it. The reality is that people are still thinking about it and each may believe he or she is the only one. Hopefully, enough information was given in the beginning to help people understand that getting over a tragedy takes time. For some, the shock doesn't wear off for weeks or even months. Remind everyone that if they are having trouble sleeping, making decisions or eating, then they are experiencing normal reactions. Others are probably having similar reactions even though they may not be sharing their feelings. Most importantly, reassure all students and staff that they are not alone.

After the first couple of weeks, it's important to convey the message that it's still OK to talk about the incident. You might encourage teachers to bring up the subject every now and then. A teacher might say something like, "I've been thinking about Dwayne a lot the last couple of days and missing him. I'll bet some of you are missing him, too." This provides a forum to continue to talk about the trauma and accompanying feelings.

With each new development in the police investigation, the conversation will again focus on the event. Allow that to take its natural rhythm and provide places for students and staff to vent feelings and emotions. Continue to provide information on typical reactions to grief or critical incident stress and resources that are available to help. For some, the shock doesn't wear off for weeks or even months.

### **Beyond First Month**

As time goes by, be aware of anniversaries or any other "trigger" events that might happen. The end of the school year will almost certainly cause a reaction of some sort. As people say goodbye and look back over the year, the tragedy will be the topic of conversation again. The school must be prepared to allow students time and a mechanism to express that pain. If the students seem to be having trouble with this, a collective letter to the victim's family may help. Allow your students to do something; it encourages closure.

If someone is arrested and goes to trial, the tragedy becomes fresh again. Those people closest to the event probably will have to testify. The media attention will be intense. In many ways, this can become a second victimization. Expect to continue dealing with reactions for some time to come.